

# Lost Identities—Gender and Computer-Mediated Communication

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**ABSTRACT.** In this paper I shortly present some gender-related features of spoken interaction and then compare those with the features of the modern online communication. With a few short study cases I support my belief that computer-mediated communication enables individuals to hide their true identity by means of manipulation in virtual reality.

## 1 Introduction

Modern society imposes on us the impression of two completely different worlds. One is the “real” world of numerous social interactions that define humans as social beings, constantly seeking connections with others; the other one is the world of “virtual” reality, existing parallel with our every-day reality. The latter enables us to hide, seek our own independence, and yet still maintain that connection with the outside world that is becoming increasingly broad, extending beyond the boundaries of the individual’s own reach.

How much information about our speech partner is lost when that person is not standing in front of us? Do there remain a sufficient number of recognizable (linguistic) characteristics in CMC to determine the gender of that individual on the other side of the communication line? If the majority of characteristics of traditional communication are hidden, could one say, therefore, that CMC is mostly genderless?

Socialization processes provide us with identity related rules and guidelines. These are then applied by individuals within social expectations, those that our society has of us and those that we have of others. Do (the same) rules apply in online communication as well?

This paper is an attempt to answer the above questions, as well as to investigate some common characteristics of traditional, “face-to-face” oral interaction versus those of modern online communication and to discuss some of the most obvious differences between the two. A short case-study of different examples of texts found on the internet provides the basis for analysis of the gender-related characteristics of CMC. Both of the above mentioned interactions necessarily have positive features and negative “side effects,” but today we simply cannot imagine our lives without both, as electronic media become increasingly normal means of social interaction.

## **2 Some gender-related features of spoken interaction**

Conversation is teamwork—it works smoothly only if partners cooperate. The result of a spoken discourse is dialogue, where speakers and listeners take turns, whereas the result of a written discourse is the paragraph.

It also depends on the gender of the listener (as well as their mood, age, social status etc.) how the information is received and perceived.

As Stenström claims, in spoken interaction there is a higher degree of cooperativeness and harmony in women's talk, where the "back-channels" (embodied in items like *m, yes, oh, I see, really*) often occur as a sign of attention. Lexical items such as *well, sort of, you know* are typical of informal spoken interaction and facilitate the smooth flow of conversation:

"Since spontaneous speech is delivered on the spot, speaker turns usually contain various types of hesitation phenomena, such as silent and filled pauses ... , verbal fillers (*well, I mean, sort of*), false starts, repetitions, and incomplete utterances" (Stenström 1994: 1).

I can agree (from my own experience) with Deborah Tannen when she says that men tend to use more silent pauses, since they immediately seek for a solution to the problem and think about it, while women show their empathy and attention with different expressions.

The extra talk, more often used by women than men, that helps create a pleasant atmosphere and is common in informal situations of spoken interactions is referred to as phatic talk.

"Questions and answers could be considered as the backbone of conversation...", so Stenström (1994: 15). Speakers thus take turns; they either wait for their speech partner to stop talking before they begin (smooth speaker shift), or their words overlap with the other speaker's words (unsmooth speaker shift).

According to Stenström, tonicity is yet another important feature of spoken discourse. Here, for example, one raises their voice when they ask for confirmation, while a falling tone of one's voice expresses confirmation.

Speech situations vary, claims Stenström further. They can be formal or informal; they can involve everyday matters or highly technical ones. Speakers can be either close friends or merely coincidental acquaintances. In my opinion, women's ability to juggle with multiple tasks at once is reflected in more formal conversational situations, where informal blends with formal.

Stenström (1994: 15) uses the terms 'coherence' and 'cohesion' as two further typical features of spoken discourse: "A discourse is said to be coherent if what the speakers say fits in and makes sense to the speakers in the actual context. Generally, coherent utterances are also cohesively linked, lexically, grammatically, prosodically, and interactionally, with the immediate discourse."

Informal conversation, on the other hand, is less restricted:

“Everyday topics are easy to talk about. No sophisticated vocabulary is needed, and no deep knowledge is required. Topics related to a professional field, on the other hand, not only require adequate knowledge but generally also certain jargon” (Stenström 1994: 26).

Brief chats only consist of “what is talked about” (no introductions, no farewells, or phatic talk); telephone conversation, on the other hand, has a more fixed pattern. Face-to-face (FTF) conversational structure depends on the situation, as do informal e-mails. Chat-rooms, similar to chats, may have only one topic; they may “jump, shift” from one topic to another. What, however, about more formal online correspondence?

We will pursue the answer in the following chapter.

One might argue that the above mentioned characteristics are also typical of any written discourse that is not necessarily an online one. That is true, though in this section I am only focusing on spoken FTF interaction as opposed to online communication, where one hides behind the computer screen and can still be “in touch,” though miles away.

### **3 Computer-Mediated Communication**

Language is, indeed, as Williams (1992: 66) explains, “a manifestation of society such that social variation is mirrored in language...”, and “...speech is seen as the product of social convention and norms...” Therefore, the norms of today’s modern society have shifted from conventional oral communication towards “computer talk.” Why visit a co-worker in the office next door when one can write an e-mail in a matter of seconds? Why pay a visit to a dear friend when one can save valuable time and join a forum or a chat-room? One’s outer appearance does not matter, nor does one’s gender; one does not have to pay attention to the late evening or the early morning hours, and problems do not have to wait – just turn on the computer and send a message or join the chat-room.

Keisler et al. therefore write: “CMC is therefore less personal in comparison with FTF communication” (1984: 1123-1134). These authors describe CMC as a channel which “depersonalizes” communicants, since they cannot exchange paraverbal cues, such as facial expression or vocal pitch. The authors assert that there is a resulting social anonymity around which communicators must imagine their audience. Furthermore: “...nonverbal indicators of vertical hierarchy, status, and power, including seating positions and dress, cannot be transmitted via text. These factors have been theorized to reduce inhibition and constraints of etiquette, reduced socioemotional content, and a “democratizing” effect in which hierarchical differences in status are less apparent than in FTF contexts” (Jaffe and Co. 1995).

There is also an increasing number of virtual communities which people may join. What is so special about these communities is the fact that they involve people who may never have gathered the courage to join such a group otherwise, if it were not for the “safe computer environment.”

Some forms of CMC have already gained “the reputation” of a mass medium. As such, “it is capable of both, synchronous communication, requiring the simultaneous presence of communicants, and asynchronous communication, which essentially consists of a progression of non-simultaneous messages. The characteristic of interactivity, however, distinguishes CMC as a potentially "interpersonal mass medium" (Rafaeli 1986: 110-134, quoted in Jaffe and Co. 1995).

The spread of CMC rests on demands of industry, commerce, government, academia, and the public. “The occurrence of distance learning, virtual communities, internet talk radio, internet relay chat (IRC) conferencing, and electronic plebiscites underscore its wide range of application. Fluency in the jargon of the internet is becoming a prerequisite, and its access a recruitment incentive, in academic and business settings” (Jaffe and Co. 1995).

It should therefore be emphasized that in CMC, instead of focusing on talking, we focus on writing; instead of focusing on speakers as producers of texts, we focus on writers, and instead of focusing on hearers/listeners as consumers or receivers of texts, we focus on readers.

As we know, women have traditionally been placed in subordinated social roles, but computers in today’s virtual world enable them to disguise their gender and to occupy other, non-traditional positions:

“Human beings realize the importance of perceived identity in relational communication and often seek to maximize reward within relationships by choosing to exhibit certain identifying attributes. The text-based character of computer-mediated communication (CMC) makes it possible for users to carefully limit or select identifying cues they exhibit . . . The combination of a CMC-based shared virtual reality, which affords its members the ability to design their exhibited identities, may present us with a view of what is possible in a "real world" with different social expectations” (Jaffe and Co. 1995).

In the world of CMC, people can control which gender-related attributes they reveal or hide. They no longer need to meet gender-based social expectations. Their behavior is no longer dictated by traditional society; therefore, inequality between the sexes is minimized.

One can observe this when, especially in scientific online texts (articles etc.) a female author can restrain herself from using “typical woman language” by being completely “professional.” The same could be said for traditional formal

correspondence, where even the formal rules for scientific publications will “masculinize” a text.

How much information about our speaking partner is actually lost when that person is not standing in front of us? Are there still enough characteristics recognized in CMC to determine the gender of that individual on the other side of the communication line?

Susan Herring says yes. In her 1994 talk called *Making the Net \*Work\**, she said that men and women have recognizably different styles in posting to the Internet.

In informal online communication, for example, there are numerous indications of the “author’s gender.” Jaffe and Co. (1995) present the summary of the research carried out by a number of investigators, such as Lakoff, Eakins, Soskin, John, Strodtbeck, Mann, Kaplan, Farrell, Aries, Leet-Peregrini, Tannen, Herring, Fishman, Eubanks and others. Some examples are listed below:

- women's language makes more frequent use of emotionally intensive adverbs such as ‘*so*’, ‘*terribly*’, ‘*awfully*’, and ‘*quite*’;
- women's language is full of adjectives and adverbs that add triviality or unimportance to the text, such as ‘*sweet*’, ‘*dreadful*’, ‘*precious*’, and ‘*darling*’;
- women usually offer more positive reactions than men. The latter use more aggressive language than the former;
- men tend to react straight away by trying to solve problems, while women long for the contributions of others, agreeing, understanding and supporting;
- women wish to keep the conversation going; their conversational patterns are described as “interdependent” and “cooperative” by Deborah Tannen, whereas male conversational patterns express “independence” and assertions of vertically hierarchical power;
- women use many apologies and questions; they seek personal orientation and support, whereas men use more expressions of strong assertions, self-promotion, rhetorical questions, authoritative orientation, challenges and humor.

One could therefore argue that the above-mentioned characteristics are sufficient to enable recognition of the gender of our communication partner, since our only visual stimulus is the computer screen, and we only have written words to express ourselves. There is no need to use gestures, facial expressions and other forms of body language, tone of voice and pitch range, which “give away” the gender of the person in FTF communication. On the other hand, we are aware of the fact that some individuals take advantage of the fact that this kind of virtual reality enables them to manipulate and thus hide their identities in the safe privacy behind the screen.

## 4 Further common features of CMC and FTF communication

At this point we could summarize some of the “language universals,” presented to us by Brown and Levinson (1978:107-115). The following characteristics can be found in both online communication as well as “face-to-face” communication.

### a) Use of in-group markers:

There are numerous ways in which the speaker/writer can claim common ground with the hearer/reader, such as the use of generic names and terms of address (like *mate, buddy, pal, honey, dear, duckie, luv, babe, Mom, blondie, sister, cutie, sweetheart, guys, fellas* etc.).

### b) Use of in-group language or dialect:

In different communities, where two different languages or dialects co-exist side by side, one should be able to switch between the two in order to be able to communicate. The same phenomenon can be observed in the world of computers. If one wishes to join a chat-room or a forum, they should be able to “speak,” “write” and understand that particular language or dialogue and therefore switch from one they are familiar with to the other, which is a particularity of that part of virtual world.

### c) Contraction and ellipsis:

When both partners, A and B, share some mutual knowledge, ellipsis is possible. Even indirect requests, which are normally considered impolite (or negative politeness) gain positive connotations (e.g. *Mind if I smoke?* or *How about a drink?*).

### d) Use of jargon or slang:

When the members of a certain group share mutual knowledge, the use of slang or jargon words is comprehensible. Thus, associations shared by both partners are expressed by certain terminology.

### e) Pseudo-agreement:

The example is found in English in the use of *then* as a conclusory marker. One speaking partner thus brings conversation to an end, in prior agreement with the other partner; e.g.: *I'll meet you in front of the theatre just before 8.00, then.*

## 5 Short Case Studies

For the brevity's sake of this paper I will present only four examples, taken from the internet. Short comments are added, but the authors' gender is not revealed any sooner than in conclusion.

**Example 1:** this text is taken from a health forum. It is a doctor's answer to a patient: formal, detached, though he/she does refer to the writer (2<sup>nd</sup> p. sg. *you*), short, straight to the point; not too complicated. Medical expressions are used, though language is simple enough for a layman to understand.

Zindaclin is used to treat acne spots. The medication contains clindamycin phosphate, which breaks down in the skin to clindamycin and is antibiotic. Zindaclin helps reduce the number of bacteria present and this, in turn, helps to prevent the pores from becoming blocked and new spots forming. The symptoms you've mentioned (double vision, slurred speech, drowsiness, vomiting, etc.) are some possible side effects of zolmitriptan. You may consult a dermatovenerologist and psychiatrist for each of the problems you are experiencing.

**Example 2:** the author disregarded grammatical and spelling rules in order to express her/himself more freely or quickly. It is an example of a quite formal e-mail to his/her colleagues.

Dear colleagues,  
attached you will find the framework for the second cycle of the pedagogical programme. Have a look and spend some time finding out what you can offer in terms of courses - highlighted in green: linguistics or literature (with a focus on education and cultural matters); in yellow: as many optional subjects as you find feasible, each worth 3 credits for our departmental list and on top of that if anybody feels like offering an elective/optional subject (3 credits) for our University list (for any student from any department or other faculties, let me know by Friday, at least the title..).

Besides that we were asked at the meeting yesterday to nominate two experts for the review/evaluation of the pedagogic programme - suggestions are welcome. The only requirements are that they have an academic title (mag., dr.) and references from the field of education.

I suggest we meet before the end of the month to discuss these matters.  
Have a nice day. M

**Example 3:** the message was taken from a university forum. This student is hiding his/her true identity behind a pseudonym. Short and straight to the point, though emoticons are used.

Author: Oyster

Date: 12-03-07 08:43

I can see nobody is brave enough to start. 😊

I'll begin then, even though I'm a greenhorn in this respect 😊

Time and place are not relevant.

Take care, P.

**Example 4:** The text below was found in one of the forums and contains emotionally colored words, typical of a woman, even though some strong and foreign words are used, as well as unusual punctuation, which would be more usual in the world of men.

I'd be very curious to know the accuracy amongst different subpopulations. I ran my personal blog through it: female. My academic blog: male. My academic writings: uber male. My random notes to friends: female.

I think i have a complex or else the system is reminding me that more socially "appropriate" material is definitely male. Just an ounce of emotions and bam! female kicks in.

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## 6 Conclusion

Language is not only a means of exchanging information but it is also a very important means of establishing and maintaining relationships with other people. By engaging into conversation, we learn more about our speaking partner, not just from *what* they say but also from *how* they say it.

Online communication, on the other hand, provides us with the opportunity to “switch off” the outside world when we do not wish to engage in different relationships. This safe home (or office) environment with the help of modern technology offers numerous ways of communicating with people without actually meeting them face to face. It saves time and money. It offers discretion and anonymity.

“CMC, the process of one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many discourse using a computer-based channel, is predominantly a text-based medium. Users don't see each other's faces or hear each other's voices. Transmitted information is limited to text content easily controlled by the sender. Nonverbal and paraverbal cues which denote social hierarchies, therefore, are not present in this medium...” (Jaffe and Co. 1995).

Spoken discourse, on the other hand, preserves its mission as the main communication media. No matter how advanced the technology and how alluring

the virtual world, people are still beings who need to interact. Not only through distance, with the help of computers, but mainly through proximity of others.

Though FTF talk and CMC seem worlds apart, with numerous differences, there are still so many characteristics they have in common, that it is safe to predict that CMC will never take completely over, since it retains so many features of the FTF talk.

However, since CMC lacks over 80% of the information about the speaking partners, it is fairly easy for a speaker to disguise his/her true identity, including gender. Traditional gender-based differences are not a less marked feature of computer-mediated communication; they can be just as obvious as they are in FTF communication, but only if we let them prevail. Recognizable (linguistic) characteristics in CMC that determine the gender are still present, but they can be manipulated by individuals. Virtual reality thus seems an inviting and safe environment, where various inequalities can be reduced to a minimum, for as long as we want.

The examples in the case study show that a female doctor (ex. 1), a female professor (ex. 2), a male student (ex. 3) and a female author (ex. 4) do not expose their gender in a straight-forward manner and therefore support my thesis.

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